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# Experiential Learning and City as Text©: Reflections on Kolb and Kolb

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The ancient Greek followers of Aristotle were called the Peripatetics, apparently because their teacher taught philosophy as they walked under the *peripatos* ("covered walk") of the Lyceum, an area just outside of Athens. As a graduate student I thought this had to be a rather inefficient way of teaching, conjuring as it did an image of students jostling to get close to the teacher, some rushing to keep pace while asking questions or taking notes and others distracted by a bird flying overhead. City as Text© (CAT) has made me rethink the facile assumptions behind that image. Maybe walking around in a particular place is an especially appropriate way of learning.

I am a philosopher by training, and "experiential learning" is not a term I would have used when I began as a college teacher to describe my approach to teaching. I have taught what philosophers *say* about experience—but only in a rather abstract way. We have not philosophized about what we have experienced together. But I do like to walk around cities, and a number of years ago I participated in my first City-as-Text exploration as part of a National Collegiate Honors Council conference. What I chose then as simply a pleasant way to spend an afternoon has led to a very enriching professional and personal journey. CAT has been not simply another good teaching method but an opportunity to reconsider all of my teaching.

Experiential learning is a staple of all that the NCHC Honors Semesters Committee does (Braid 1990), whether it is the Semesters themselves, the City as Text explorations at NCHC conferences, or NCHC Faculty Institutes. I was honored to be one of the facilitators in January 2006 for an Institute focused on Miami Beach and the Everglades where my current reflections first took shape. I will continue to write of it as "City as Text" even though several successful Faculty Institutes have shown that you don't have to be in a city to do "Place as Text". The value of CAT is amply evidenced by its results; nonetheless, I think it is valuable to situate CAT in some broader philosophic contexts.

The committee's practice has been influenced by the thinking of David A. Kolb, a well known psychologist and organizational theorist at Case Western Reserve University. I am somewhat chagrined to admit that it was only after several iterations of these NCHC activities that I realized this David A. Kolb was not the same as David Kolb, sans initial, a philosopher, whom I had also read. But this misidentification was a fruitful one for me, as I explain below.

The revolving process of learning is a hallmark of David A. Kolb's account of learning, and I will start with that. His account of experiential learning begins with a model derived from the work of the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin, with doses of John Dewey and Jean Piaget added. His diagram of the model is circular, with four components or stages. At the top is "Concrete experience"; then, moving clockwise, the learner comes to "Observation and reflection," then proceeds to "Formation of abstract concepts and generalization" at the bottom of the circle, continues to "Testing implications of concepts in new situations," and finally moves back to "Concrete experience." In what follows, I will use his model to elaborate how CAT experiential learning functions in contrast to what is too often typical in college education. (I disagree with how Kolb the psychologist describes the nodes of "concrete experience" and that of "observation." It seems to me that the "concrete experience" of a novice is distinct from that of an educated observer, who can experience more in a particular situation. But that discussion is for another time.)

David A. Kolb writes that "learning, change, and growth are seen to be facilitated best by an integrated process that *begins* with here-and-now experience followed by collection of data and observations about that experience" (21, italics added). Experience may be the *ideal* starting point, but in thinking about learning through City as Text, I have come to see that, in order to understand college-level honors education, it is advantageous to enter the process elsewhere, as I hope to make clear in what follows.

It is vital to see CAT in terms of what it is not. Much of college education stresses what happens at the bottom of Kolb's circle: formation of abstract concepts and generalization. In typical university classes we predominantly study more or less elaborated systems of abstract thought, such as various systems of philosophy, literary theory, statistical methodology, accounting, or engineering. Each major has, I would argue, its set of "boxes," its periodic table of the elements, a way of classifying the world for disciplinary purposes, and concomitant methods for manipulating these categorized entities. Perhaps college educators rightly make these intellectual frameworks the major focus of education. We try to get students to think like sociologists, artists, physicists. Nor is it entirely abstract. We do try to show them

how implications are drawn from these conceptual systems, using both old, staged experiments and newer situations. We train them to gather data, write up the results, reflect upon them, distinguish empirical and normative issues, and finally move back to encapsulate new findings or replications in terms of the abstract conceptual systems—as in Kolb's circle schema. What Kolb terms "concrete experience" is narrowly focused concreteness.

Most college teachers, I think, have a genuine commitment to their own discipline and think that there is something good and right about at least one of the approaches within the field (even after the traumas of graduate school). We think our discipline's concepts and methods can be used fruitfully to understand our world better. Unfortunately, I think that all too often our students, and ourselves as well, may inadvertently become locked within our disciplinary frameworks. For example, in my Introduction to Philosophy class, I teach freshmen to think philosophically, and my colleagues are teaching them to think like economists or biologists or criminal justice majors. Then, when I have these students several years later in my Honors Colloquium, they find it difficult to see people as people rather than "observing subjects" or "enumerating behaviors" or "calculating agent cost-benefit ratios."

Learning how to classify and "put labels on things" is an important step, I believe, on the way to framing experience in terms and propositions that we can in turn analyze using those wonderful abstract systems. But our students may become unable to observe fully or to reflect broadly on their experience rather than on conceptualized aspects of their experience. In Kolb's terms, such students have "concrete experience," but too often it is abstract-driven experience.

Of course, our honors students typically have been, from elementary school through college introductory courses, rigorously learning how to put experiences into boxes and learning to do it quite well (not to mention learning to jump through hoops). Many of us have had the experience of sitting around a table with our students in an interdisciplinary honors seminar, encouraging them to "think outside of the box," and being frustrated at how hard that is for them. I marvel that I thought one classroom seminar exhortation would enable my students to set aside years of education with a contrary message.

The problems we see in our students arise in part because it is hard to follow the simple four stages of Kolb's model without getting stuck in a rut. He quotes Piaget about the adolescent who ultimately "returns to a more active orientation that is now modified by the development of the reflective and abstract power that preceded it" (24). But it is hard for the student and, yes, for the scientist or scholar to be open to new concrete observations that do not fit into our sometimes painfully learned abstract frameworks.

In terms of Kolb's cyclic model, the problem is not just that some students go through only some of the four stages, as he seems to imply, but that they do it in a too restricted fashion, often circling only within the realm of "abstract concepts and generalization" under their professors' direction ("compare and contrast the theoretical approaches of X and Y"), and we too often have them move through the other three stages in a rather narrow, even perfunctory manner. If we could trace students' academic thinking over time, recording each rotation through the process with a pencil on paper, I suspect we would discover that, instead of tracing a number of circles, our students' learning would look like a basket: a fairly dense container at the bottom, where the various conceptual moves of their major occur, and then a few narrow lines going through the other three stages of Kolb's model—hardly what Kolb desires for experiential learning.

We need to expand the circle of learning and make it more supple. All too often, students formulate, with nudges from instructors, some straightforward, commonplace suppositions from their major courses, write down the results they experience in a prescribed fashion, and make some perfunctory reflections. It is a commonplace at my institution that we need to expand our students' horizons, as if this were simply a matter of increasing the diameter of their thinking. In my philosophy classes my role is often to get students to slow down and pay closer attention to the subject, experience what is close at hand, experience it more concretely and then reflectively. As an exercise in my Existentialism class, they have to observe or recall a few significant moments and describe them as they think Sartre or de Beauvoir or Levinas would. They nearly always cover too much at too little depth. At these times, my students remind me of my children racing through a museum only noticing the big flashy items in displays.

What to do? One can try various means of getting students to put aside their preconceptions and to observe. I call this "decrustifying," making limited patterns of thinking more supple or, if necessary, breaking them open. My colleague in art brings pinecones and flowers to class; the chemist brings students into the lab to do experiments with water samples from local sources—all good, but still in one place.

Get out of the seminar and walk about. Walking slows us down, giving us time to notice, then to reflect, and then to walk some more. And it is not simply walking; it is walking together and talking with one's fellow peripatetic students. A stroll together can open us up to differences as we realize that the literature major, the business major, the biology major do not notice the same things—just like their professors—and we can share our learning as process and result. We become peripatetic friends, as faculty in CAT Institutes will attest.

Walks around a neighborhood or an ecological community work effectively precisely because they are not abstract, but specific. They have rich texture in locales that are essential to rich learning. As the students continue to move about, they notice other aspects of a place, that what seems true of a scene from one perspective becomes less obvious as one moves about. A building looks one way from close up on one side, another from farther away in relation to its surroundings on the other side. The hearing-impaired student or faculty member comes forth as an acute observer of a dimension others might not have noticed. The fluidity of people moving through a neighborhood, of birds wading through a stream, is multiplied by the students' perspectives and helps to keep the group from coming to any premature closure. It is practical epistemology.

A complication to all this is that the students should do explorations in small groups. Two or three seems to be a good number of people to approach a resident walking a dog and engage her in conversation. Five is already too many in my experience. But then the students have to be out on their own without the teacher—without me—hovering over them, giving them that nudge, explaining some key theoretical insight. They have to learn on their own! This complication is not a drawback but a strength—quite different from what I thought as a graduate student about the Peripatetics not all being able to hear Aristotle.

And there is a special aptness to exploring specific places. Plazas, neighborhoods, marshes, and hammocks are, as we explore them, structuring places, not static but growing, decaying, and rebuilding. Certainly that was the case in both of our Institute sites: Miami Beach and the Everglades. The facilitators drew neighborhoods on the maps and sent us out. The groups—like typical honors students—transgressed boundaries and crossed streets to talk to more inhabitants and explore unintended buildings. Around South Beach, we began to see how the area is an accumulation of the layers of 1920s resort, 1950s retirement community, and 21st-century gentrification revival, each eroding or tearing down parts of a previous era. We noticed evidence of Jewish and Cuban communities waxing and waning and of the *nouveau riche* now in ascendancy. In the Glades, we observed patterns being laid down over time, recycling. We could discern, with some nudges admittedly, how the layers of *periphyton* altered as the water level lowered, with snails feeding, snail kites preying on the snails, and alligators gathering as surface water became scarcer, as dikes were built.

Although I am in general skeptical of claims about "today's students" as if they were a different species from other generations, there is something about CAT as learning that perhaps we are only now simulating electronically. The other David Kolb, the philosopher, explores this connection in his

work both using and reflecting on new media. For example, as he wrote both a book and a hypertext on the same subject, he reflected on the differences that the two modes of representation induce. He echoed a CAT slogan when he pointed out that a "popular model for hypertext is: Exploration!" (1998). Aristotle's students did have one technological advantage over our students: as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, papyrus was expensive and they lacked ballpoint pens, so they were not so busy trying to write down every word that they were not paying to attention to what he was saying. I have seen CAT students grouped around a area resident with one student talking and the rest scribbling in their notebooks—not really a conversation.

Kolb the philosopher suggests that much current academic thinking rests on tired dichotomies such as fact/value or "a related but less famous dichotomy of passive data facing active forces, or passive content manipulated by active subjectivity" (1998). In my philosophy classes, I find students oscillating between an epistemic pole of factual truths typically validated by science and a pole of subjective determinations where belief is sufficient to create truths, and then back. They have no good models for what might be in between. Classes suffer from "too limited a diet of examples," as I believe J. L. Austin once said.

CAT supplies a remedy. CAT is a geographic analogue of a really good hypertext. Both are "edgeless"; you can go in a great variety of directions. "Places are a wonderful topic for broaching these issues, since places are emphatically factual yet also socially meaningful and historically changing. They show us the way we are thrown into already operative dimensions of linked possibility within the process of self and social identity and change" (David Kolb, 2006). CAT involves exploring communities that are not neatly circumscribed, that observers have to recognize mentally not in some entirely subjective manner but out of almost too much material, almost too many structures. They are polymorphous communities; they are mixes of subjective and objective that give students new examples of how to learn.

A motto of Mitchell Wolfson, Jr., the founder of the Wolfsonian Museum of Florida International University in Miami Beach, which hosted our NCHC Faculty Institute, suggests a similar understanding: "What man makes, makes man." The museum's collection "encourages us to ponder the cultural, political and aesthetic value" of designed objects during the years 1885–1945 (Wolfsonian Museum). CAT can be an essential part of "complexifying" our students' thinking so that they learn in a more flexible, active, complicated, ambulatory fashion, neither amorphous nor what I call "unimorphous" but richly polymorphous. Then students can move through the psychologist Kolb's circle of learning in an increasingly deeper, more complex, yet more flexible fashion. Instead of Kolb's simple circle or a basket, I picture a wreath made out of twigs and wires, all interwoven in intricate fashion.

Perhaps Aristotle took his students walking in the Lyceum not simply because it was convenient or cheap. Perhaps the Socratic dialogue on friendship, *Lysis,* begins there for a reason. Recent archaeological exploration indicates that the Lyceum, which was a little bit beyond the Athenian city wall, was used for military exercises, religious gatherings, and meetings of the Athenian assembly. It had a gymnasium building and roads or running tracks for athletic training. It had some "large open spaces and shady groves of trees, bounded roughly by [two rivers] and Mt. Lykabettos to the north. A series of roads led to the Lyceum from in and around the city. . . . Irrigation channels were constructed to keep the area green and wooded" (Morison).

Perhaps Aristotle knew a great place to do City as Text when he saw one!

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